Testimony

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Information Sharing and Institutional Awareness

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With this hearing, the Committee has identified one of the most difficult yet most critical issues that have surfaced since Hurricane Katrina's destructive path through the Gulf Coast: how the large collection of organizations—public, private, and nonprofit; federal, state, and local—can effectively share information to improve the nation's response to predictable natural disasters.

We must learn the critical lessons. In part, unfortunately, future Katrina-scale disasters are a certainty, and we owe it to the nation's citizens to improve our ability to respond. In part, terrorist events would pose precisely the same kinds of problems, and we cannot allow an inadequate response to undermine national security. It is a great honor to appear before you to explore these issues.

A Failure of Initiative—A Failure of Coordination

The House Select Committee pointed squarely to a failure of initiative in responding to Katrina. And, as Committee's report argues, that failure is a failure of coordination. Indeed, government's response to Katrina ranks as one of the worst failures of government administration in the nation's history.

Two things compound that tragedy. First, the nation invested the four years following the September 11 terrorist attacks to ensure that the nation would be ready the next time. It was not.

Second, everyone involved in the response—from top federal officials to local officials on the front lines, from leading nonprofit organizations to private companies—tried their very best. Despite that, citizens needlessly suffered, and some unquestionably died because their government did not serve them well.

Learning these four lessons would build a far stronger, much more nimble system of emergency response.

Lesson 1. Structure: Leadership matters more

The first lesson is that some bureaucratic structures are clearly better than others. But we need to sidestep the inevitable temptation to tinker with the structure and focus instead on getting the fundamental parts to work together better.

The central question is whether the lead government agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), ought to be moved out of the Department of Homeland Security and be remade into an independent super-agency charged with emergency preparedness and response. If we rolled back the clock, we might well not have put FEMA into DHS to begin with. There is substantial evidence that the move disrupted FEMA's organization and led to the departure of a large number of its most skilled employees.

However, the last thing FEMA needs now is yet another fundamental disruption to its organization and operations. Over the decades, it has bounced like a ping pong ball around the federal bureaucracy. Deciding now to make FEMA independent of DHS would solve some problems. It would just as surely create new ones. And it certainly would stir up more turmoil just as the agency is trying to regain its feet.

There is no reason to believe that a fundamental restructuring of FEMA would solve its coordination problems. A different structure would bring new advantages—and new disadvantages. It would also perpetuate the myth that the complex and wildly varying nature of problems FEMA faces can be solved through structural changes. What FEMA most needs is strong leadership devoted to collaboration, and political support from the highest levels of government—in the White House and in Congress—for this mission.

Consider the boundaries separating FEMA's regions and the path of Hurricane Katrina (see Figure 1). Katrina showed an uncanny instinct for finding the cracks between the FEMA's regional boundaries. If FEMA now restructured its boundaries to prevent a recurrence of the confusion that surrounded Katrina, the next storm might well outwit the structural designers yet again. Biological hazards might well pose very different problems than natural disasters, and terrorist attacks could pose yet more confounding problems.

Structure unquestionably matters. Some structures are better than others. But responding to every problem with a new structure is certain only to destabilize the organization's operations and undermine its ability to respond to new crises. At this point, moving FEMA yet again would divert attention from the more important imperative of building a new coordinating strategy.

There is nothing inherent in FEMA's current structure that prevents its officials from working closely with other officials, in other agencies and at other levels of government. What FEMA most needs now is not another shuffle in the deck of the government's organization charts.

More generally, information sharing and institutional awareness requires strong and effective leadership. Different structures can make the job easier. But people matter most.

- ***We need to strengthen the leadership of our key governmental organizations—and to focus our leaders on building an effective network of action—before we engage in further tinkering with organizational structures.***

Lesson 2. Culture: Build an all-hazard system to bridge organizational boundaries

That closely connects with the second lesson. The central task of leadership is to create an organizational culture that supports the mission.

The investigations into the federal government's response to Katrina show that our heightened concern about terrorism has undermined our ability to deal with other events. In moving FEMA to the Department of Homeland Security, weakening its preparedness function, and failing to build a strong intergovernmental component into its operations, we have made it far harder for FEMA to do its job: not only in responding to natural disasters, but in dealing with terrorist acts as well.

At the core of FEMA's struggle to deal with Katrina was the change in culture that preceded the storm: a focus on terrorism, to the exclusion of other hazards; and an emphasis on response, to the exclusion of remediation and other strategies of reducing risks in advance of events. The narrow focus produced a tunnel vision that dramatically reduced FEMA's capacity to respond to natural disasters like Katrina

The enormous complications of merging 22 different federal agencies into DHS have understandably preoccupied top leaders. They have devoted an enormous amount of energy simply to trying to synchronize the operations of its disparate agencies. That process, however, has created an inward-looking culture with an extremely narrow tunnel vision, devoted to controlling activities dealing with homeland security. Its mission demands a flexible, outward-facing culture devoted to building partnerships with the vast range of organizations—public, private, and nonprofit; federal, state, and local—whose operations, put together, define how well the nation's response works.

This by no means suggests that we should reduce our attention to terrorism. Rather, it underlines the need to pay attention to these important principles, taught by first responders:

- *All terrorist events begin as local events.* On the morning of September 11, New York City's firefighters knew at first only that they were responding to a very large fire in the World Trade Center, probably caused by a plane crash of some kind. The October anthrax attacks began with a mysterious death of a photo editor in Florida. Wisconsin's monkeypox outbreak began with a patient who came to the doctor with lesions that looked like smallpox. Unlike some natural disasters, which appear days in advance on weather maps, terrorist events occur suddenly as an emergency in some community.

- *All natural disasters begin as local events.* The first indication of the failure of the New Orleans levees was when National Guard troops looked outside their door to find the water suddenly rising. Tornadoes, floods, and earthquakes begin as neighborhood-based events. The searing post-Katrina videos as well as the sad tales that accompany other natural disasters, remind us that natural disasters likewise focus their effects on some community.

- *The effectiveness of the response to such events typically does not depend on what caused them.* Many of the canine search and rescue teams that worked in the horrible conditions of Ground Zero in New York joined the search in New Orleans. For the dogs searching for victims, it did not matter whether terrorists or hurricanes had toppled the buildings. For victims trapped on rooftops in New Orleans, it did not matter whether terrorists or flooding had chased them there. When disasters occur, people need help. Some terrorist events, like dirty bombs, raise special first-response issues. In general, however, terrorist events and natural disasters create similar issues for government's response.

An organization's culture defines which issues are seen as problems, which problems become most important, and how the organization responds to the important problems. In recent years, FEMA has focused more on terrorism. That focus transformed its culture and reduced its capacity to deal with natural disasters. Given the agency's performance in the aftermath of Katrina, there is no reason to believe that its response to a terrorist event would have been any better. After all, the agency had several days' notice of Katrina's arrival; terrorists would certainly not provide advance warning.

We need to strengthen our capacity to respond, quickly and effectively, to disasters, whatever their cause. Experts call this an "all-hazard" approach. We need to refocus FEMA's culture, in particular, on all all-hazard approach. Enhancing the capacity to respond to hurricane victims surely does not diminish the capacity to respond to terrorist attacks. Indeed, it would only strengthen it.

The "all-hazard" approach is one that is far more than a homeland security strategy. It is one that challenges agency managers to step back and ask what purposes their organizations seek to achieve. It demands that these purposes, not the narrow constructs of organizational boundaries, shape their behavior and the work of their employees. It is a way of shaping and driving the organizational mission.

- ***We need to focus the energy of our top governmental leaders on creating an outwardly looking culture that supports their mission. Internally looking structures, rules, and organizational silos will only prevent our public organizations from getting the job done.***

Lesson 3. Technology: Enhance interoperability

The third lesson is that our fragmented communication systems have made it difficult, sometimes impossible, for first responders to work together in emergencies.

On September 11 and following Katrina's assault on the Gulf, we learned that the central problem in government's response was coordination. After the hurricane hit, coordination problems cascaded. The city of New Orleans had difficulty in cooperating with state officials. Louisiana state officials complained that FEMA was unresponsive. FEMA officials said that they had difficulty in getting the attention of top White House officials. Managers in other federal agencies said offers of help went unanswered or that FEMA made it difficult to get help to where it was needed.

According to the House Select Committee that investigated the response to Katrina,

> Many of the problems we have identified can be categorized as "information gaps"—or at least problems with information-related implications, or failures to act decisively because information was sketchy at best. Better information would have been an optimal weapon against Katrina. (p. 1)

These information gaps led to unfortunate problems of coordination that severely undermined the nation's response to the tragedy.

"Coordination," of course, is the universal goal for all complex operations. "Failure of coordination" is the universal diagnosis for most failures. But the nation has now been taught the same searing lesson twice: the first casualty of many catastrophic events is the regular communication system. And as difficult as coordination is under normal

circumstances, it is vastly more difficult—and sometimes impossible—when the communication system fails.

Sometimes the failure is the collapse of the technology. When Katrina hit, it took down radio, telephone, and cellular towers. Many New Orleans police officers were on the streets without any way of communicating with their colleagues or with headquarters.

Sometimes the failure is the technological—the inability of officials in different organizations to talk to each other, often because their radios operate on different frequencies. That problem plagued Louisiana state police officers, who were unable to talk with their colleagues in local law enforcement. It plagued members of the National Guard, who arrived in Louisiana to help but discovered that they could not talk to each other. The National Guard commander finally solved that problem by buying new radios. The same problem afflicted first responders in Mississippi as well.

We will keep paying the painful price of failing to learn the fundamental lesson of September 11: we need robust, interoperable communications systems. A disaster, natural or manmade, will strain our resources under the best of circumstances. But when we do not do what we can to make our basic communications technologies link better, our citizens will unnecessarily suffer.

- ***We need to invest our scarce public dollars on plugging the foundation of our national response system: the technological cracks that prevent our first responders from coordinating with each other when disaster strikes.***

Lesson 4. Bureaucracy: Focus on results

The fourth lesson is that bureaucratic procedures, designed to get the public's work done, too often get in the way.

The reports by the House Select Committee and the White House make this point repeatedly. Journalists' stories are legion. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, in her first phone call to the president, asked for "all federal firepower." She continued, "I meant everything. Just send it. Give me planes, give me boats." New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin sent out his own plea: "I need everything." He criticized federal officials and said, "They're thinking small, man. And this is a major, major, major deal. And I can't emphasize it enough, man. This is crazy." When top federal officials told them help was on the way, Nagin countered, "They're not here." Frustrated, he added, "Now get off your asses and do something, and let's fix the biggest goddamn crisis in the history of this country." Federal officials said that they were awaiting clear requests, submitted in the proper form, from state and local officials. The difficulty of negotiating these rules meant that help was painfully slow in coming.

FEMA's core problem lies in its inability to secure effective coordination among all of those who help is needed to build an effective response. An organization with a fixed hierarchy and a fixed pattern of response will always be overwhelmed by events that do

not match its structure. Since the array of homeland security events—natural and manmade—are unpredictable by their very nature, that approach dooms an organization with such a strategy to failure. That is precisely what happened in Katrina, and it is surely what will recur if we do not develop a better system.

The steps to building an effective system of coordination should not be seen as a problem of structure, which requires a structural solution. Rather, it needs to be seen as an issue of partnership, which requires leadership. The top government official needs to act as the conductor of a well-tuned orchestra, not as the commander of a hierarchy. In Katrina, there was an unseemly fight for the baton.

Rules matter. The violation of federal contracting rules in the hectic days and weeks after Katrina hit led to millions of dollars of questionable expenditures, according to the Government Accountability Office. But rules guide agencies in pursuit of their missions. Results matter most.

How can we create a nimble, effective, robust, results-driven strategy? We need strong leadership.

Such leadership, in turn, requires:

- Establishing FEMA as a reservoir of expertise, for both remediation and response.
- Creating within FEMA the locus of strong command. That command should focus bringing together the needed capacity wherever it can be found—not on insisting on giving orders through a hierarchy.
- Fashioning effective partnerships among the vast array of federal agencies whose expertise and capacity might be needed in a crisis. Not all agencies will be needed in every crisis, and which agencies will be needed when is impossible to predict.
- Building an effective intergovernmental link between FEMA and state/local governments.

This requires coordination that is both vertical (from local and state governments to the federal government) and horizontal (across the range of federal agencies with the ability to contribute to government's response). Such a system must, by necessity be flexible and lithe. It must be based on a networked, not a hierarchical approach to governance. It requires strong leadership to secure coordination. A "center-edge" approach (see Figure 2) provides a model. Consider how it would apply to FEMA and responses to homeland security events.

- *FEMA at the center.* At the center should be FEMA. Its job would be to set policy goals; steer the system to achieve these goals; and measure results. It would provide money to partners in the network, including state and local governments, to reduce risks in advance and to enhance their ability to respond when needed. It would collect information about what works best.

In short, FEMA needs to be the conductor of a well-tuned orchestra, equipped to play the right notes depending on the score—depending on the events it must confront. That requires strong and effective leadership—leadership tirelessly devoted to building effective partnerships.

- *Federal agencies supporting the middle.* In the middle should be other federal agencies. Many agencies have the capacity to contribute to the federal government's response. The Department of Transportation can supply logistical help. Housing and Urban Development can assist with housing. Defense can provide emergency relief supplies, such as food and water, as well as helicopters and heavy equipment. Its forces, including the National Guard and federal troops, can provide needed manpower. In disease-based and bioterror events, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, among many other agencies, could play an important role.

  In short, many federal agencies are potential contributors to a homeland security effort. Which agencies need to get involved depend on the nature of the event. Since events are hard to predict in advance, FEMA needs to be flexible, ready to bring in the assistance it needs, depending on the problem. It needs to be able to do so quickly, reliably, efficiently and responsively.

  In each federal agency with an important—or potential—homeland security role, FEMA ought to identify a senior liaison official. This liaison ought to be prepared to deliver that agency's capacity when needed. These relationships ought to be tested and practiced, in advance, through a wide range of all-hazard exercises. The federal government needs to be prepared to respond with what is needed, when it is needed. The problem ought to define the strategy.

- *State and local governments at the edge.* Subnational governments work at the front lines. The first response system will only be as good as their response. FEMA has a central responsibility in ensuring that they are prepared to respond effectively. FEMA also has a central responsibility for bridging the gap between levels of government and between governments at the same level. For example, major communication problems have plagued every major homeland security response in recent years. FEMA has an obligation to help resolve those problems.

  To ensure the system's ability at the edge to meet the widest possible array of homeland security problems, FEMA should enhance the role of its regional offices to secure a coordinated response. To do so, FEMA's regional offices should embed senior FEMA staffers in each of the 50 state homeland security offices, and it should work with them to build a coordinated all-hazard strategy.

  Finally, FEMA should once again make remediation a major part of its mission, and to make grants to state and local governments a major part of its remediation

strategy. In the past, critics have charged that homeland security grants were little more than patronage. In an era of high risk and tight budgets, that is unacceptable. Congress can avoid that problem by focusing the grant system on the areas and issues of highest risk, and by making the grants conditional on achieving high performance.

In short,

- ***We need to create a system that rewards results. We do not need a system that obsesses over procedures and jurisdictions. When people are in trouble, they rightly expect their government to help—and they rightly are impatient with excuses built on poor leadership or misplaced devotion to rules.***

Putting it together

This is an imposing agenda. Can it work?

There is, in fact, ample evidence already in place that such a strategy would work effectively. Under the leadership of Admiral Thad Allen in New Orleans, the U.S. Coast Guard has already demonstrated the value of such an approach. The lesson is that the situational awareness that comes from front-line experience provides a guide for solving these problems.

The response of the first responders at the Pentagon on the morning of September 11 teaches the same lesson. Arlington County fire, police, and emergency officials led the response, but they had effective support from the FBI and other federal officials. Mutual-aid agreements with surrounding jurisdictions brought much-needed reinforcements, and Virginia officials worked well with officials from Maryland. Unlike the chaotic and troubled intergovernmental work in the Gulf, this team worked together well because they had developed carefully coordinated plans and they practiced them, together and repeatedly. In fact, many of the commanders at the scene of the Pentagon that Tuesday morning had just they had completed a joint exercise the previous Sunday. They had not anticipated a terrorist attack on the Pentagon by means of a hijacked airplane, but because they had developed and practices working together, they responded predictably to the unpredicted attack.

From these experiences come proven lessons:

- We are facing complex issues that no organization, no matter how it is structured, can fully own or control. A coordinated multi-organizational response is essential.

- Such a response depends on creating action plans in advance—and practicing them repeatedly.

- This practice not only makes interorganizational cooperation second-hand. It also creates personal relationships of trust among the top officials.

- This cooperation depends heavily on developing and sharing information among the principals. A resort to bureaucratic rules and structures hamstrings the response.

- That information sharing needs to be supported with up-to-date, interoperable communication systems. The technology needs to be an important ally, not one more barrier to overcome.

- Information supplements hierarchies. It doesn't replace it. Traditional organizations need to continue to develop strong, effective competencies. They need to come together in flexible, mutually supportive networks, as the mission requires.

- The mission drives the partnership. It defines who needs to play which roles, to meet a wide range of problems, many—perhaps most—of which are unanticipated.

- The more that organizations need to coordinate on complex problems, the more we need highly skilled individual leaders who see such action as job one.

Thanks to the hard work of front-line managers, we know how to do these things. We have evidence that it works. We have struggled with the painful consequences of failing to learn the repeated lessons of past events. We know that we need a system built on these principles:

- *Operational awareness.* Institutions, especially governmental ones, focus on a keen awareness of the front-line operational problems.

- *Coordination.* Government agencies work aggressively to develop an integrated, coordinated response to these problems.

- *Shared information.* That response builds that response on shared information.

- *Focus on results.* Governmental leaders focus on results, not procedures, as the primary standard of accountability.

Figure 1
FEMA's Regional Office Boundaries and the Path of Hurricane Katrina

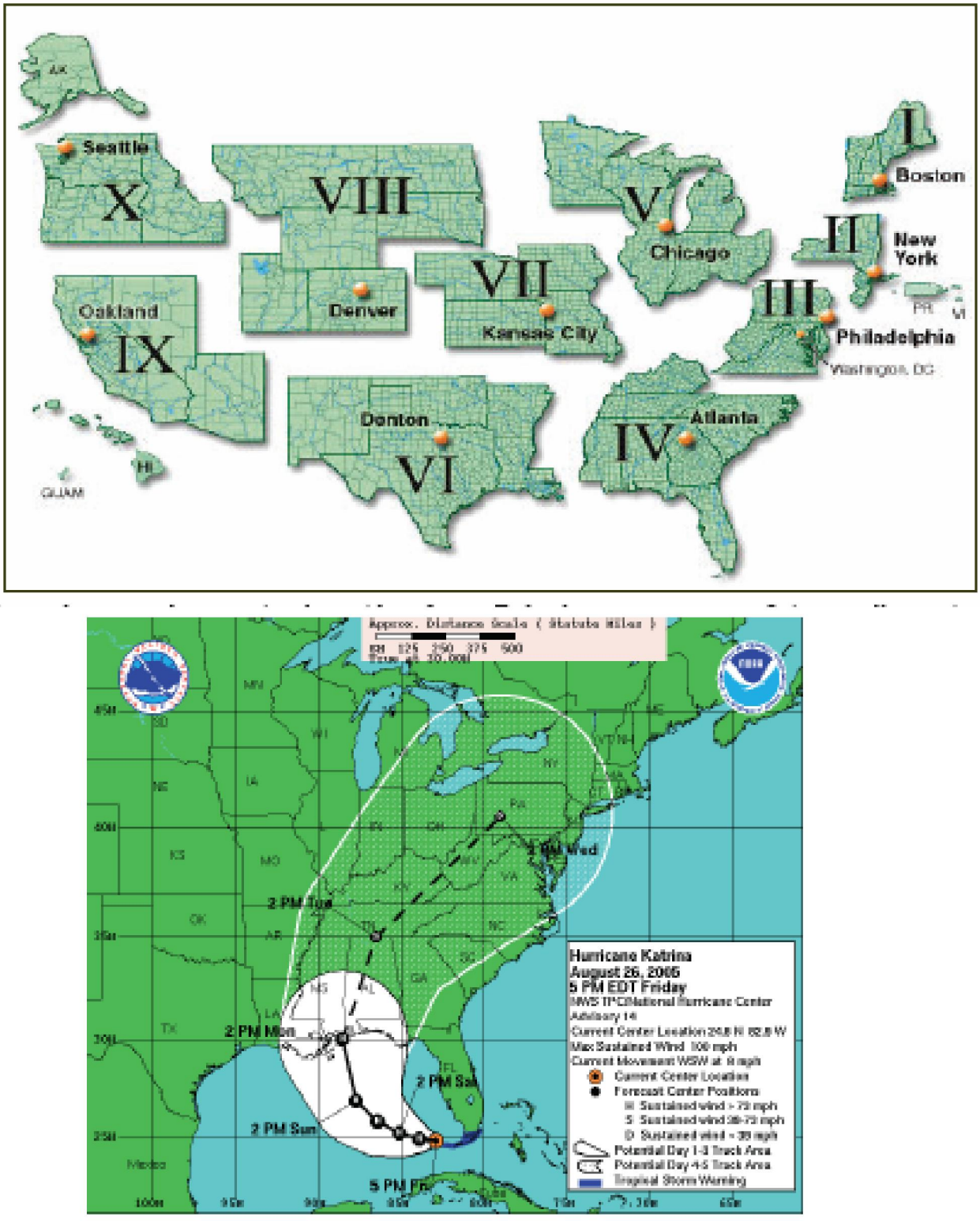
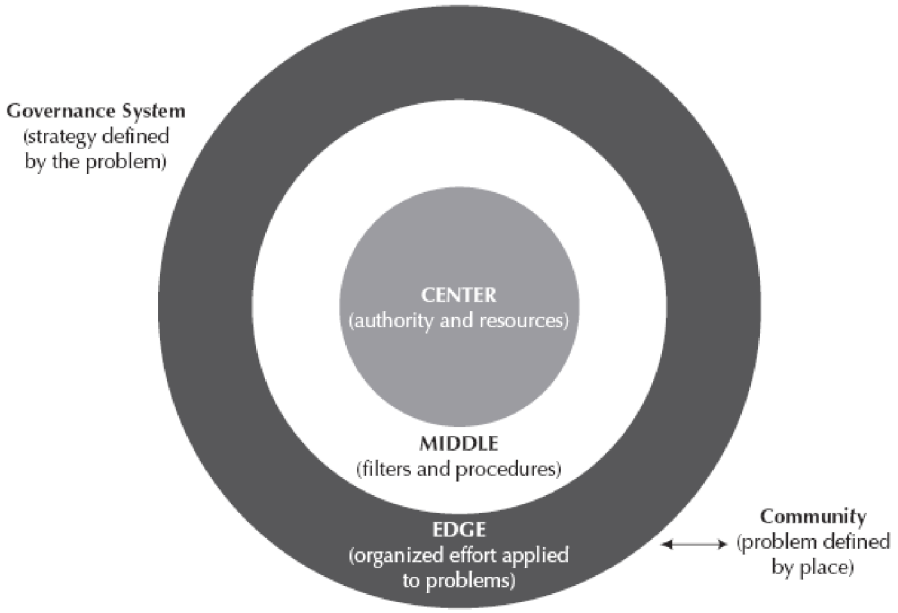


Figure 2
The Center-Edge Approach

Figure 2: Managing Networks Through the Center-Edge Approach



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